

## A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Advertising Language in Selected Nigerian Mass Media Commercials

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### Abstract

Advertising is a form of communication and it is one of the oldest professions in the world. It is as old as humanity. It is the market instrument which advertisers use to influence the behaviour of consumers at the point of purchase (Sandage, Frouburger and Rotzol, 1997). Language is a very powerful tool in advertising and advertising language is unique in terms of usage and the mass media are the agencies of diffusing advertisement messages. The aim of this paper, among others, is to discuss the essential characteristics of advertising language in the mass media which enables the advertisers to reach the target audience and also to find out how advertising language influences the consumer's purchasing attitude.

### Introduction

Communication is an important feature of human life and communication between individuals is done through the use of language. Language is a typical attribute of human being. Communication as a social process is embedded in human culture, and as society changes, the transition of culture also changes. Human beings live in a complex world and without communication, man's existence would be impossible (Schramm, 2000). Communication is the transferring of a thought or a message to another party, so that it can be understood and acted upon (Pryse, 2002).

Advertising on the other hand, is the means by which the consumer accesses the product, is in recent times, largely staged in the media-the print or electronic. This is obviously because through the media, advert messages get across to a vast number of audiences. Advertisements provide people with information on the availability of particular products, the place of purchase, the nature of the products, etc (Olateju, 2006:102). This function of advert has been said to be completely socially useful completely ethical and relatively free from semantic problem (Boulton, 1978:83).

### The Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Interactional Sociolinguistics. Interactional Sociolinguistics is a theoretical and methodological perspective on language use that is based in linguistics, sociology, and anthropology. Because of these disciplinary roots, it shares the concern of all the three fields with language, society and culture. (Schiffrin, 2000). Speech Act Theory is part of Interactional Sociolinguistics. Speech Act Theory, the ethnography of communication and micro ethnography are concerned with language, society and culture.

Goffman, (1963, 1971) analysed face-to-face interaction and concluded that face-to-face interaction is very important because it provides an understanding of how language is situated in particular circumstances of social life and how it both reflects and adds meaning and structure to those circumstances.

Also Gumperz (1982) analyses of verbal language revealed that communication helps us to understand how people may share grammatical knowledge of a language but differently contextualize what is said, in such a way that very different messages are produced and understood.

The views of Goffman and Gumperz are very pertinent to advertising, especially in selected mass media commercials because advertising is a good example of Interactional Sociolinguistics.

### The Concept of Advertising

Advertising is the market instrument which advertisers use to influence the behaviour of consumers at the point of purchase (Sandage, Fruburger and Rotzol, 1997). As the communicating element, within the marketing mix, it aims to manipulate consumer opinion towards particular products or market, mass media, bill boards, sky writing etc. It constitutes the medium through which advertising messages are passed on to the target audience, while consumers' response to the messages are monitored through the quality or volume of the advertising product (Comanor, 1999).

Advertising research has its roots in the behavioural sciences consisting of Psychology, Sociology and Social Psychology hence, its central theme is people, therefore, the underlying purpose of all advertising is

increased awareness of the consumers about a product (Diamond and Oppenheim, 2004)

Advertising can make or mar a product in the market, depending on the effectiveness of the advertiser's message and the atmosphere surrounding it. Advertising cannot turn a poor product or services into a good one but can create awareness about both old and new products and services and show how various needs and wants can be satisfied. Increasingly, advertising performs some advanced information, about products and services to consumers before they reach the place of purchase.

Vance Packard in expressing his fear about the power of advertising charges that.

*Many of us are being influenced and  
Manipulated for more than we realize in  
the pattern of everyday life.*

But consumers do not often change suddenly from one product to another, in many cases, they go through several steps before buying a product. In general, they move from awareness of the product or services to awareness and then to knowledge, liking, performance, acceptance (or conviction), and then to the purchase of the product or services. About 80% of the products manufactured in Nigeria have the likelihood of having a substitute. That is that fear that substitute which is established in the market section needs to retain or sustain leadership position. This makes it very important for manufacturers to advertise their products. The advertiser however makes sure that the value and quality of the product is developed continuously to meet consumer's changing needs and standards. Advertising messages are always regarded as communication designed by the sender to produce certain forms of reaction, behaviour or attitude from the receiver of the message. According to Jefkins (1999):

*Advertising presents the most persuasive possible  
selling message to the right prospects for the  
products or services at its lowest possible cost.*

The message has to get to the consumers. The consumer is an indispensable individual without whom advertising will be a useless effort because the consumer is still king as to what he does with his money. He is free to save or spend his money in any way he wishes.

Advertising has been publicly condemned and praised. Concerns over the economic, social, moral and ethical issues of advertising has become one of the most economic and social forces in the society. Partly because of its influence, most people have learnt to want better products and services to take better care of their health and improve their living conditions. Advertising as a form of communication must be very effective because a bad advert is a bad use of medicine, therefore, the communication tasks are the main goals of advertising and these goals according to Encyclopedia Britannica (2000) are as follows:

- (a) To reach a definite audience, to a given extent, and during a given period of time.
- (b) To produce awareness and knowledge about the products and services
- (c) And to point out the qualities of the products or services to the persons the advertisers wish to influence.

In advertising, the advertiser endeavours to achieve a link between the sender and the receivers. This link is a form of communication and Fletcher (1998) describes this as bridging the gap between the sender and the receiver. There must be a message as well as a medium, therefore according to Sandage et al (1999).

*Advertising has to be through the mass media  
of newspaper, magazines, books, leaflets, posters,  
radio, television and cinema. It must be paid for  
in money not in sweat and energy.*

This means that advertising messages may be placed either by an individual or group of people. For an advertisement to be effective, it has to consider first its audience; the educational, social, political and religious background. It has to consider the subject that will appeal to that will appeal to the audience and what should be avoided (Gumperz, 1982). In addition, alienating an audience by choosing subject which proves to be too high for the consumer level of satisfaction or comprehension and this is very important, especially in Nigeria and most undeveloped countries where the level of illiteracy is still very high. For example, Eco Bank advertisement on television is too sophisticated for most of the Nigerian audience. The relationship between the dog and the girl and how it relates to the business of banking is not quite understood by many Nigerians.

Advertising has to consider the occasion and what is fitting for it. It should take into account the type of products or services to be advertised; whether it is a luxury goods or consumer goods. The age and sex of the target audience also play an important role. Language also is one of the important factors that determine the effectiveness of an advertisement on a target audience.

Advertising has its advantages and disadvantages. The greatest advantage of the role of advertising is that it carries the sale message to a very large number of people. Achieving the quest of relaying the message to a large number of people is referred to as Broadcast Effect which is the most valuable skill of advertising.

Advertisement has to be placed where they are most likely to produce the greatest sales for it to be effective. It is evident that advertising means so much to many people. To the advertisers, it means a method of promoting sales to the media owners, it is a way of making money and to the agencies it means still utilization.

### Advertisement and Sociolinguistic Realities

There are different types or classes of adverts. For instance, Vestegar and Schbider (1986) distinguished between commercial and non-commercial advertisements. Non-commercial advertising is realized when an agency or organization gives information to the public about its places of programme or policy. Commercial advertisement covers prestige or goodwill advertisement and industrial or trade advertisement. In the former, a name or an image may be advertised, and in the latter, products or services may be advertised (Oyeleye, 1997:52).

Adegbija, (1982), Oyeleye, (1997), Adejumo and Odebumni (1998) and Odebami (2002), classified advertisement into six types namely, consumer, retailer, industrial, financial, classified and public services. According to them, consumer adverts aim to appeal to members of the public to purchase goods and services. Retailer adverts seek that consumers buy products. In financial adverts, financial institutions incite the public to get their services promoted. Classified adverts, published in special pages of the newspapers/magazines, and ordered (classified) according to subject are meant for the consumption of an exclusive readership who may be interested in the products or services. Public service adverts are placed by government or its agencies to inform the citizens about matters relating to their welfare (Olateju, 2006:103).

Advertisement of products is determined by the advertiser's goals. The medium of placing adverts is selected by the advertiser. Many times, given that profit making is the overriding issue in the game, the advertiser has the tendency to give priorities to advertising in a linguistic medium that can be accessed by a large majority of potential buyers than giving it in a medium that has restricted coverage (Olateju, 2006:104).

### Advertising Language

In advertising, the advertiser endeavours to achieve a link between the sender and the receiver. This link is in form of communication which Fletcher (1998) describes as bridging the gap between the sender and the receiver. He explains further that:

*To buy a whole page in newspaper and leave  
it absolutely blank is not to advertise. There  
must in other words be message as well as medium.*

The main body of advertising is notable for its information and explanatory value. For the message of advertising to be effective and successful, the language must be right and the vocabulary must be appropriate to the consumer it is hoped to influence, so the advertising language must be translated into the consumer's language. Wright et al (1999) observes that:

*A primary problem in advertising is translating  
information about the product for the language  
of the advertiser into the language of the consumer.*

Since consumer's experience with a product is likely to be inversely related to advertising effectiveness, we expect to find newer products association with a high volume of advertising and with effective use of language. Wright (1999) quoting Blair says:

*When man speaks, he is supposed. As a  
rational being, to have some end in view;  
whether to inform or to amuse or to persuade  
or in some way or the other to act upon his  
fellow creatures.*

In his sight to audience psychology and analysis, George Campel (18<sup>th</sup> century) supports his view: In speaking, there is always an end proposal or some effect where the speaker intends to produce to the hearer.

Writing a commercial is not easy for the young copywriter because the writer's ideas have to be transmitted to the spoken media (The audio visual aspect of television) because speech characteristics are a central and vital part of advertising. How to isolate copy points and select those with the best appeal is not an easy task. In print adverts, the headline plays a powerful part, sometimes all powerful parts in getting attention and making the reader want to see and learn them. There are no headlines on television, only the opening shot and because a commercial starts with some second of silence, the advertiser must depend on the picture alone. A guiding principle for constructing the opening scene could be to make the viewer say 'what's that? Tell me more'.

There is of course importance in the quality of the product itself and the television writer must certainly know about it and use his knowledge. First, he must associate the product with some perfectly natural desire in

the mind of the person to whom the commercial is being addressed. The reaction of a commercial should start from brief synopsis, this consists of just a few sentences which state the main idea and development. Suppose for example, the subject of the commercial is a new light weight electric iron, the main selling point and emphasis on the language being its lightness and speed with which it heats up. A synopsis conveying these points and containing the germ of a creative idea might run as follows:

- i. Trick device with feather indicating super lightness.
- ii. Show housewife with iron.
- iii. Show lightness in comparison with standard iron.
- iv. Demonstrate speed of heating (count the seconds)
- v. Sum up advantages
- vi. Say where it can be bought (and price)

These points emphasize the point that advertising language has to concentrate on the key points, the emphasis of some words over others, the creation of catching ideas in order to catch the attention of the audience. It is for this reason that the language of advertising is short, simple and clear. It is tailored to perform a specific job with the fewest words as possible. This is in line with Gumperz (1982) discourse strategies which believes that communication helps to understand how people may share grammatical knowledge of a language but differently contextualising what is said in such a way that very different messages are reduced and understood.

Each word, phrase or sentence is carefully selected to perform a specific function. According to Chomsky (1992), each sentence is associated with a class of pairs F. P which F is focus and P is presupposition, each pair corresponding to one possible interpretation' the copy writers mission is to communicate enthusiastically his message, but his problem as stated above is how to convert this speech to writing. According to Ingman (1995), there are two very important rules involved in writing a commercial the copywriter should use the alone method in the room of the tape recorder frequently and honestly, he should try and do away with the stiltedness in writing, this is accompanied by a general loosening of the phrase used making them less staccato. For instance, a print advertisement might use the phrase "Amazing value", the television advertisement might say "there is amazing value" isn't it? Or indeed almost anything that takes away from the trained copywriter might perhaps shrink from meaningless and lengthening statements in order to prevent misunderstanding or vagueness, the idea should be stated briefly and designed for audience acceptance. It is to be purposive.

The second rule is that the copywriter should use phrases that are generally "loser" than written phrases, he should use contractions such as don't here's rather than "do not" or "here is". These two rules will go several steps towards helping the copywriter to turn to script writer. He should conceive of scripts as a series of pictures, illustrated with spoken words. Advertising language should consist of words that are speakable. The copywriter is more constrained by time, money and fear of losing the attention of his audience. It is this reason that he employs linguistic elements that will most effectively carry his message across within the shortest possible time. Osundare (1996) states that:

*One of the strategies of advertising is not.  
Only to pack maximum information into  
the fewest possible words, but also to evoke  
the maximum possible response with the  
few words.*

Since advertising is one way communication, it should be closed with enough information and motivation for the buyer to act, for example by using words such as "buy now", "visit today", send enquires immediately to" etc the mass of people which advertising is directed to are regarded to as "heterogeneous mixture". This heterogeneous mixture is individuals who cannot interact with one another because they do not know one another and have no organized leadership to facilitate this communication. It must also be borne in mind that much of our language activities take place in direct person to person situation either in the form of dialogue or correspondence. In most cases, these personal encounters are interactive two way affairs in which we alternate the roles of 'producers' and 'receivers' of messages. However, not all our language activities are of this kind. Some of them are impersonal kind. In other words, it is unidirectional and it involves some of us never as producers but as receivers. It therefore addresses us not as individual person but as members of an undifferentiated mass. A language of advertising comes in this form.

Advertising language neglects the conventional rules of grammar and writing and that is why it is referred to as 'a language of mutilation'. It is accepted because it belongs to a world or setting where the main aim is to get the attention of the public and persuade them to buy the advertised product. The nature of advertised product determines the kind of language used.

Slogans and logos are important aspects of advertising language because they are catchy and easy to remember. Let us consider the slogans of some products as examples:

Planta – for that rich and creamier butter taste.  
Rank Xerox – We taught the world to copy  
7UP – the difference is clear

An effective slogan or logo summarizes the advertisements and provides memory peg on which the name of a product is hung.

Jingles are another good tool of advertising language. Jingles are a simple little rhyme with a repetitive meter. Jingles have become symbolic of television. A jingle is a tricky weapon and a copywriter cannot know a good or bad jingle except by trial and error. After the commercial has been seen for several times, the country is whistling it and its words have become a household phrase than you have a good commercial.

The jingle is a matter of perspiration, easily memorized. The idea must be simple, so simple as to appear almost childlike. If detached from its music, it can bear repetitive which should be simple and singable. It must comprise a tune so catchy that it runs through the mind. An example of a good jingle is a plus soap:

*Plus quality soap to wash and clean wash and  
clean wash and clean plus quality soap to  
wash and clean for cleaner, brighter, washing.*

(The rhythmic beat is from the nursery rhyme “this is the way we brush our teeth, brush out teeth early in the morning”).

One of the recent tactics employed by the advertisers is the use of objective ‘new’ for almost every brand of product we come across in our markets. Virtually all products are being changed into “new” brands and who would not want something “new”? It is obvious that human beings, being insatiable animal would want to associate with something ‘new’ at all time not what is old. These days, we come across such things as ‘new’ improved elephant blue detergent’, etc.

In advertising, the language must be appropriate to its audience in several ways. It must be presented in the language the audience can understand. It must appeal to the feeling either latent or obvious, and it must offer a real benefit expressed in comprehensive terms. It must succeed in establishing contracts with the audience’s mind quickly and effectively.

### **A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Selected Television Advertisement from Syntax and Semantic Perspectives**

Linguistics of the transformational generative school believes that the grammar of language is derived from generating all and only the grammatical sentence in that language. The language of advertising is sometimes in such a way that it gives little consideration to grammatical rules. There is a general reference for present tense and many a time, one finds a sentence without a definite verb. Most advertisements use verbs which express timelessness, a good example that readily comes to mind is ‘Omo washes brighter and it shows’.

In order to achieve its aim, the language of advertising normally employs simple language and also thrives on short sentences or phrases which are apt. Such sentences or phrases are designed to impress an indelible and favourable memory of the message on the minds; examples are set below:

Coke is it!Planta for that rich and creamier butter taste

A quick look at each of these sentences and phrases shows that the aim of language is to give a first impression to draw the reader’s attention. In the newspapers, these messages are printed in very bold letters since they are also accompanied by beautiful pictures of models on television. The effect is more, since advertising language seems to prefer monosyllabic words especially in brand names. It is recognized that if the names of products are too long, they will not make any impression on the target audience. Typical examples are “OMO”, “Coke”, Planta to mention but a few. Such monosyllabic names are easily remembered.

Advertising language does not employ the use of negative words. They are avoided except when it is used for special effects, for example, Cadbury’s chocolate spread slogan.

*“Don’t keep it to yourself, spread it on”*

The use of the dummy “do” in the subject position is to emphasize the point the target audience should help the advertiser to spread the news of the product. The product is so irresistible that it would be a crime not to spread the good news to others.

Not only is advertising language designed language to win the heart of prospective customers, it is also designed to make other brands look inferior. We must bear in mind that we live in a competitive world of commerce where the primary things is the profit you make in order to survive.

Putting the channels that advertisers use to convey their messages into consideration, each of these products cleans to be the best and for us to find out whether this is true or not, we have to buy. This is an indirect way of forcing themselves on the buyers. A very good example is the OMO advert. The very word ‘super’ indicates this. This superlative term indicates that “OMO” is more superior to other brands of detergents. There is less use of words in the advert but the pictorial effect of two women washing and both spreading their clothes in two separate adjacent ropes, one of the women uses OMO and her clothes appear brighter and clean. The other



woman uses an unknown brand of detergent and her clothes appear dull and dirty. This indicates clearly the advertiser's aim or intention for making other brands look inferior. The word, 'brighter' is a superlative adjective in the sentence structure of the slogan.

The sentences: *Washes even brighter and it shows* emphasizes the point. The word 'even' serves as intensifier and it further emphasizes the point that 'OMO' not only washes 'brighter' but 'even' brighter. Some advertisers employ the pidgin medium (pidgin based advert) to reach a wider audience who cannot speak the Standard English. For example, the tyre is described in a musical framework. The lyrics of the music appear as these:

*Never see this kind tyre before  
na Dunlop Elite, e just dey do jeje for road  
na Dunlop Elite, na im den make for Nigerian roads  
na Dunlop elite, na better tyre wey be det tire o  
na Dunlop Elite, e just dey do jeje for road  
na Dunlop elite*

The repetition of the phrase, "Na Dunlop Elite" is for easy memorization. The message is very straightforward considering the language use. The use of the adjective jeje is synonymous with 'smooth' and in this case, the adjective can be intensified with the word 'very' to give us 'very smooth'. The language is so desired to prove that the tyre is a work-horse on our roads. It must be stressed that the visual effect created by the pictorial appearance of the tyre as it moves on the road, complements the language to prove that Dunlop Elite is created for both smoothness and ruggedness emphasizing that the tyre can be used under any condition (both good and harsh conditions). The use of the phrase, "na im den make for Nigerians road" is to stress on the fact that the tyres are meant for the Nigerian roads not for any other country's roads. Thus, indicating that the advert is meant for the Nigerian prospective consumers. Since majority of Nigerian roads are bad, the tyres must be very strong to survive them.

The lyrical effect of the advert makes it a success with the Nigerian audience. All these are done in about ninety seconds. Listening to the convincing advert, only few people will not desire to have such a tyre.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of advertising is to sell goods and services and to achieve this, the language must be well designed to appeal to man's emotions. Furthermore, apart from the language which advertisers use to persuade consumers, they also employ extra-linguistic factors such as context of situation and illustrations which play a significant role in determining the overall texture of an advertisement and its effectiveness.

Nigerian advertisers should improve on the quality or standard of their advertisement linguistically and stylistically. Since the language of advertising is relevant to human choices in a competitive world of commercial enterprise, it will be worthwhile for advertisers not only to aim at persuading but also educating the prospective consumers on the advantages and disadvantages of a particular product.

Furthermore, it is essential that marketers and advertisers enhance their communication skills and also undergo on-the-job training in use of English and Communication regularly. This is because effective communication in English Language is a sine-qua-non in advertising, and advertising as a good example of interactional sociolinguistics.

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